

Elijah Lovejoy: “The Martyr Abolitionist”

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Communication has been vital in many issues in history, no more so than in the abolition of slavery. Abolitionists and free slaves wrote books and narratives to communicate to the world the pain and suffering of the common slave. Anti-slavery reformers sent many letters, like those between Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe. But perhaps most influential of all was the newspaper. Journalists around the country got the word out through opinion-based essays and records of inspiring speeches. Newspapers were cheap and available to everyone. They were the best way to spread ideas to the masses. One of the most effective journalists was Elijah Lovejoy, who used his influence to spread abolitionism. The Reverend Edward Beecher, himself an abolitionist, called him “the first martyr in America to the great principles of the freedom of speech and of the press.” Although Lovejoy rose into the ranks of martyrdom, he came from humble beginnings.

Lovejoy began his journalistic career in St. Louis, where he served as an editor of *The St. Louis Times* and *The St. Louis Observer*. He fled the city, spurred by a mob angered by a controversial, anti-slavery account of the lynching of a slave named McIntosh, killed for the murder of his abusive master. Lovejoy fled to Alton, Illinois, which is where his most important work was done. He was a preacher and was beginning to feel that he would not be honoring God if he sat idly and let this issue pass him by. In a letter to his brother Joseph, he displayed his faith in God to bring justice to the slaves: “The Lord will overrule it [slavery] for the good of black and white, and His own glory.”

He was inspired, both in mind and spirit, to right wrongs and invested great hope in the judgment of the people that they would be provoked by the Abolitionist movement to finally see the evils of slavery. Lovejoy helped to create the State Anti-Slavery Society of Illinois, which had to meet twice before it was officially formed. He contacted every abolitionist he knew and wrote a friend, "We don't want the movement to be confined to any denomination."

He faced much opposition, which U. F. Linder, Attorney General of Illinois asserted, and Reverend John Hogan, whose main purpose was to stir up a destructive mob. They accused him of damaging the good reputation of Alton and of opposing the city as well as slavery. Lovejoy defended himself eloquently, asking, "What infraction of the law have I been guilty of? When and where have I published anything injurious to the reputation of Alton? . . . Why am I waylaid from day to day . . . and my life put in jeopardy every hour?" He ended his speech by bursting into tears after speaking in defense of his family, who had been harassed for their association with Lovejoy. He could not leave Alton; he had become bound by duty, both personal and religious. "Should I attempt it I should feel that the angel of the Lord with his flaming sword was pursuing me wherever I went . . . I here pledge myself to continue it, if need be till death," he said, then walked back to his seat, only to watch as Hogan, "contended that it was the duty of Mr. Lovejoy . . . to abstain from the exercise of some of his abstract rights under existing circumstances." This story is only one example of Lovejoy's perseverance in the face of danger.

Another was the immense courage he summoned to be able to publish strong abolitionist sentiments in his newspaper in the midst of adamant pro-slavery activists.

For instance, in an editorial dated July 6, 1837, just a few months before his death and a few days after the nation's birthday, he wrote, "The voice of three million slaves call upon you to come and unloose the heavy burdens, and let the oppressed go free."

Through such heart-felt pleas, he moved many to support the abolitionist movement, and stirred many emotions within his readers. Not only was Lovejoy creating a buzz in the pro-slavery camp, but many anti-slavery activists were listening as well. He also inspired many. Although Lovejoy had a positive affect on many, his views became stronger by the minute and caused even stronger negative reactions. His printing press for *The Alton Observer* was destroyed four times, the last on the night of November 7, 1837. Two men, Edward Keating and Henry W. West, were let into the building that housed the new press by a guard. They were allowed to see a Mr. Gilman, who was the owner of the warehouse, and demanded the press be surrendered to the gathering crowd of drunks or the building would be burned. The guards decided that the building and the press would be defended. However, the rambunctious crowd was too angry and too full of alcohol to want to go without a fight. A fight ensued and, as Lovejoy himself ran out to the front of the building to defend the press that had created his career and voiced his passion, he was shot five times. He was buried two days later and his murderer was never convicted.

Elijah Lovejoy made the greatest sacrifice for his cause, his life. His spirit survived, however. Many people rushed to join anti-slavery societies, and a young Abraham Lincoln spoke out against the crime. Lovejoy's legacy lives on today. The Elijah Lovejoy Award is given annually to a journalist who shows exceptional talent and fearlessness. The Lovejoy Monument was dedicated on November 9, 1897 in Alton and stands as one of the largest columns in the country. It is a fitting tribute to the man

known as “the martyr abolitionist.” [From Anonymous, “Editorial,” *The Alton Daily Telegraph*, July 26 1897; *The Alton Daily Observer*, Jan. 21, 1836; Elijah Lovejoy letter to Joseph Lovejoy, Nov. 21, 1834 <<http://www.state.il.us/hpa/lovejoy/letter4t.htm>> (Oct. 23, 2004); Elijah Lovejoy, “Editorial on Slavery,” July 6, 1837 <<http://www.state.il.us/hpa/lovejoy/letter9t.htm>> (Oct. 23, 2004); “Biography of Elijah Lovejoy,” <<http://www.state.il.us/hpa/lovejoy/bio.htm>> (Oct. 23, 2004); “The Lovejoy Monument,” <<http://state.il.us/hpa/lovejoy/monument.htm>> (Oct. 23, 2004); and W. T. Norton, *Centennial History of Madison County, Illinois and Its People, 1812-1912.*]